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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Churchman

EDITORIAL

In All Things Charity

Does the General Synod of the Church of England have the power to vote God out of existence? And if it did, would God oblige them by disappearing? The question may seem odd to some, but it is not a new one. Jonathan Swift asked it three hundred years ago, long before the creation of General Synod. His answer was that the Church as an institution would survive very well without God because it hardly bothered with him as it was. Those who have been following the extraordinary events of the past few months in the Anglican Communion and in the Church of England must often have wondered whether the parting of the ways has finally come, with God going off in one direction and the Church in another.

On the surface at least, it looks as if the controversies have been all about bishops, the symbols of unity that supposedly bind the structures of Anglicanism together. The Lambeth Conference, which was designed to bring them all together every ten years or so, turned out to be a non-event at which a significant number of invited guests failed to appear. The reason for this was mainly that one very prominent United States bishop turned up and stole the show, not for personal gain (which God forbid, whether he exists or not) but in order to highlight the plight and advance the cause of unjustly persecuted minorities everywhere, especially homosexuals on all five continents. ‘They are in your congregations,’ Mr. Robinson told the assembled media, as if that were sufficient justification for tearing the fabric of the Anglican Communion apart. In his view it is clearly much more important to walk with lesbians, gays and transgendered people of all faiths and none than to hold together a Church that includes people he regards as homophobic traditionalists, and he sees it as his mission to help the Archbishop of Canterbury impose his prophetic vision on the Anglican Communion as a whole.

Alongside this is another scenario which has been playing itself out in England—the saga of women bishops. The church has already decided to have them in principle, so all that is required now is a procedure for protecting those

who cannot in conscience receive them as mothers-in-God. In this case however, the official wisdom is that the Church of England must not be torn apart merely to pander to a largely heterosexual minority that deserves what it gets because of its history of discriminating against women. In the brave new church of the liberal establishment, it is clear that some minorities are far more equal than others. Thus, when it comes to homosexuals, we are called to go on dialoguing *ad infinitum*, in the hope of reaching a common mind. Since the gay lobby has no intention of changing its position (and would not exist if it did), this can only mean that we are expected to stall until a sufficiently large number of people has accepted the validity of homosexual practice, which can then be legitimised with no more than residual dissent.

On the subject of women though, the official line is the exact opposite. Here we are told that we have talked long enough, even though (by their own admission) the committees set up to examine the different options did not have time to consider them all thoroughly. What we need to do now is vote for long-delayed equality and justice, since if we do not do so, some secular equal opportunities commission will try to close us down. Making elaborate provision for dissenters will only delay matters and lessen the chances of the final legislation getting through Parliament. Therefore we have to keep special provisions to a minimum and remove effective safeguards, which are only likely to be a hindrance in the future. In the circumstances, a code of practice that can be amended without legal action is an act of generosity because it gives opponents of women bishops a breathing space to allow them to die with dignity. A church which once prided itself on being a hospital for sick souls can now provide a hospice offering terminal care to those whose time has passed.

General Synod's extraordinary vote to remove existing legal safeguards for the protection of clergy and parishes opposed to women clergy and bishops is a wake-up call not only to all those who love the Church of England, but to everyone in that Church who loves and fears God. There are some whose minds have been so clouded by secular cries of 'justice' and 'equality' that they are blind to the clear teaching of the Word of God, though it is astonishing how quickly many who call themselves Bible-believing evangelicals can harden against the truth when they are confronted with it. Emotion and prejudice quickly replace Scripture, tradition and reason, resulting in that loss of a spirit of love which has been such a notable feature of the recent debates. It is not

necessary to be an Evangelical to see this, or even a Christian. The religious affairs correspondent of “The Guardian”, who is a Muslim, has noticed it, as have most of the more serious commentators in the secular press. Even the senior bishops of the church have come to realise it, which gives us some indication of how serious the problem must be. The majority in General Synod does not often defy the archbishops, but on this matter it has done so and incidentally revealed the cold and uncompromising dogmatism that lies at the heart of the movement for women bishops. Evangelicals may say that women’s ordination is a second-order issue, but not these people. For them it is of the essence of the faith, and it is all too plain that once they gain control of the church, it will be possible to be ordained without believing in God (that happens already, in case you have not noticed) but not if you are against the ordination of women. The formal abolition of God by General Synod is not as remote a possibility as it may seem.

God is love, and the heart of the issue is not whether we can walk together as a church with women bishops who are not fully recognised by everyone, but whether we can show enough love towards one another for the two integrities that emerged in 1992 to survive in a common ecclesiastical structure. For that to happen, the majority must bend over backwards to accommodate the minority and give it space to breathe. There is nothing to be gained by trying to humiliate and marginalise those who stick to traditional biblical values, because whether the latter leave the church or not, they will continue to burden the consciences of the persecuting majority. Every woman consecrated as a bishop will know in her heart that she has only got that far because others were unfairly treated, which is hardly a recipe for a happy church.

Furthermore, the slightest sign of disobedience to such a bishop will become a major source of tension and have the potential to blow the church apart. Bishops know just how recalcitrant some clergy can be and how little they can do to bring them into line. Sooner or later, they have to recognise the limits of their effective jurisdiction, whatever the legal theory may say. Women bishops will find this harder to do, because clerical recalcitrance will undoubtedly appear to them as misogyny. Experience has shown that paranoia in the episcopal palace can quickly lead to a witch-hunt in the diocese, with the difference that in this case it will be the witch herself conducting it! The spiritual and psychological damage which this will do is incalculable, and far

greater than the departure of a handful of traditionalist clergy, though a church strapped for manpower and cash can ill afford to lose them either.

It is often the case that pride goes before a fall, and several commentators have noted that the feminists' victory may be the beginning of their eventual demise, as their 'victimhood' becomes even less credible than it already is, and the cachet of being oppressed is bestowed on others. The complete absence of both humility and love among those campaigning for the consecration of women as bishops has not gone unnoticed, and they should not think that public opinion will always be on their side. The Israelis long exploited Jewish victimhood in order to establish their state in Palestine, but it is now widely understood that the oppressed have become the oppressors and much of the sympathy for Israel that was there in the early years of the state has disappeared. Robert Mugabe was once hailed as a hero of African liberation but is now almost universally vilified because his tyrannical nature has come to the fore and been seen for what it is. WATCH (Women and the Church) is not in that league of course, but the principle is the same, and if it starts driving good people out of the church for essentially ideological reasons, its days may be more numbered than they now appear.

Where do we as Evangelicals stand in all this? On the basic principle, we are at one with Anglo-Catholics in opposing the ordination of women, and even if we see this as a second-order issue, we have a duty to support them as the liberals establishment seeks to marginalise their role in the church and in effect drive them out altogether. We must not be fooled here—once the high-church remnant is neutered, it will be the turn of the Evangelicals. As the Bishop of Durham has reminded us, supporters of GAFCON and its affiliates are even less welcome in the councils of the church than Anglo-Catholics are, and there are many who would be only too happy to see us expelled as soon as they are gone. Burying our heads in the sand and pretending that the current crisis is nothing to do with us is short-sighted nonsense, though sadly, that does not mean that it will not happen. Far too many Evangelicals are prepared to huff and puff at monster rallies in selected venues like All Souls, Langham Place, but if the house is about to be blown down they turn tail and run for cover.

There are many things we need to do, but one of the most important is to form an alliance with Anglo-Catholics and other traditionalist-minded people to

ensure that we can influence as many voters in General Synod as possible. If we can get just over a third in the house of laity, for example, we can block any legislation for women bishops and force the establishment to think again. If we are a significant part of such an alliance we shall be in a good position to demand our own Evangelical ‘flying bishops’ (or whatever they will be called) and give structural expression to our beliefs. We must be under no illusions—the establishment will do everything it can to prevent this, which is why we must hold together and stand firm until it sees that accommodation is in its best interests. Politics often looks like a dirty business, but in a democratic system strategic thinking is necessary if any programme is to be enacted. Waiting for the ideal conditions in which a ‘pure church’ might emerge is hopeless—God has called us to use the talents we have and not to bury them in the ground in the hope that a better day might come.

In all this of course, we must not forget that the heart of our message remains a spiritual one. God is love, and if we do not show that both in our dealings with one another and with those in the church with whom we profoundly disagree, we shall find that in the end we shall be in the same place where WATCH and its allies now find themselves—as victors who have won the political battle but lost the spiritual war. To keep women’s ordination as the second-order issue that we believe it to be, we have to combat those who insist that it is something of first-order importance, and that means making room for opponents of the move to flourish inside the church and not be forced out of it. When all is said and done, the classic formula for Christian love remains as central to our concerns as it has ever been. In essentials like the supreme authority of Scripture we must insist on unity, in non-essentials like the form women’s ministry should take we must fight for the tolerance of diversity, and in all things, whether essential or not, we must demonstrate charity towards those with whom we disagree. If we do not we may be sure that we shall end up, as Jonathan Swift foresaw, as churchmen without God.

GERALD BRAY